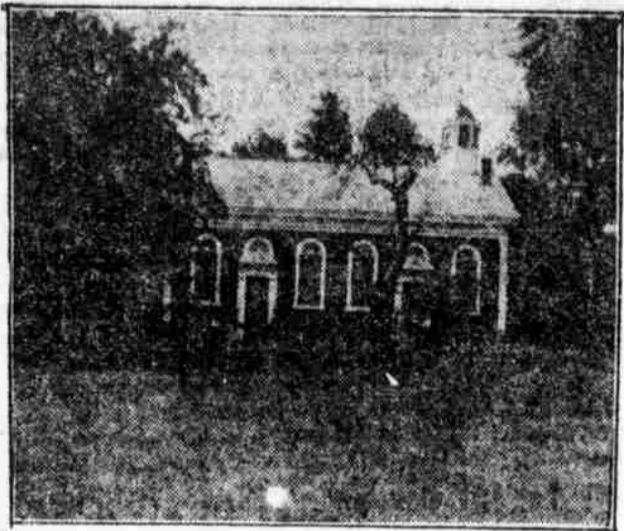
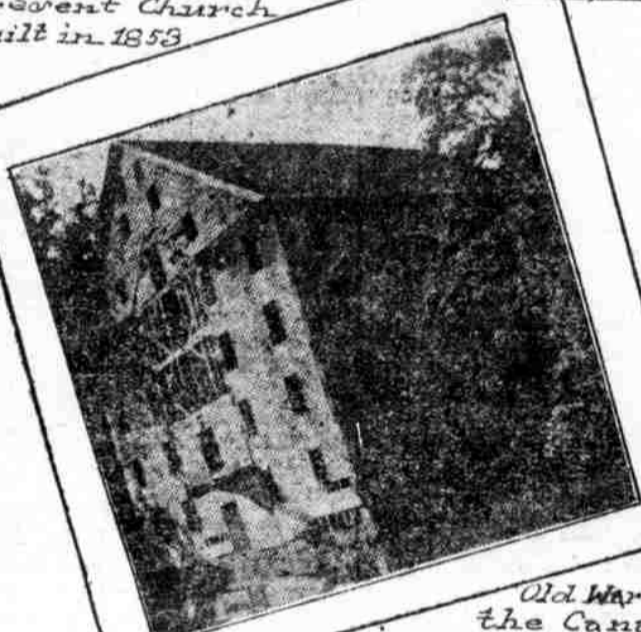


FORMER COMMUNISTS OF ZOAR IN THEIR FREEDOM

Members of
the disbanded
Ohio colony say
their old life was
one of slavery



Present Church
built in 1853



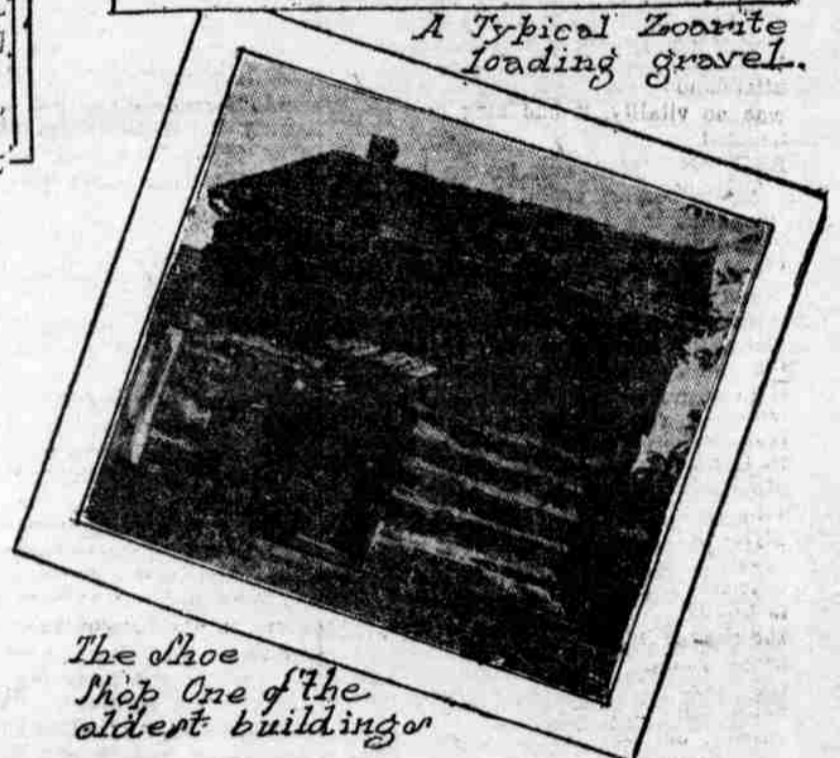
Old Warehouse on
the Canal
Dismantled and unused



Bimeler's House
"The King's Mansion"



A Typical Zoarite
loading gravel.



The shoe
shop One of the
oldest buildings

(By Courtesy of the Cleveland Leader.)

It is not often that it is permitted to one to watch the disintegration of a communistic society; to study the changes which take place after its dissolution, and to note the development of new institutions in place of the old. All of these, those living in the neighborhood of Zoar have been permitted to see. It is an interesting thing to converse with the former members of the "Society of Separatists of Zoar," and to learn from them what they think of the new order of things and to find out what are their feelings with reference to their former establishment, that now has passed away.

An opinion expressed by these people is of some importance, also, on account of the fact that Zoar has been one of the most successful social experiments in the New World. A sufficient time has elapsed since the disbanding of the society, in 1898, for the people to become thoroughly acquainted with the world of strife and competition and for them to form clearly defined judgments concerning the relative desirability of the old and the new ways of life.

In order that we may understand their present positions, it is necessary to know something of the history of the enterprise; the conditions and motives which in the first place caused the establishment of this communistic settlement; and, also, those things which enabled the community to have an existence, more or less successful, for a period of 80 years.

WAS FOUNDED IN 1817.

The settlement was founded in the year 1817 by German immigrants belonging to the religious sect known as the Separatists, because they separated from the established church of Wurttemberg. The differences in faith between the orthodox Lutherans and the seceding ones were not very great; perhaps the greatest was the opposition of the new sect to all formality and ceremony in religious services. In their articles of faith they assert that they shall "render to no mortal honors due to God." They also opposed military service and, influenced by whipping and imprisonment, they resolved to seek a refuge in the New World.

Acting on this determination more than three hundred sailed, landing in Philadelphia in 1817. The Quakers received them kindly, rendered them much assistance, sheltering the greater number of the party during the first winter. Thirty had, however, pushed westward, and at Zoar, in Tuscar-

rawas county, Ohio, built a log house, the beginning of the village. There, the following spring the remainder of the party joined them.

FORMED TO CARE FOR AGED.

For a time they lived as they had been accustomed in the Old World, but as there was among the settlers a considerable number who were not able to support themselves on account of their advanced age, it became a question of importance how these should be cared for. After considerable deliberation, it was decided that they would form a communistic society, and accordingly they formed an association, consisting in all of fifty-three men and boys and one hundred and four women and girls. Those who entered the organization renounced all private ownership of property, both personal and real. They provided a system of government and agreed to an article whereby it was provided that anyone who should withdraw could not demand compensation for work nor regain any property which he had surrendered to the general association.

The agreement of 1819, amended in 1824, continued in force until a constitution was drawn up in 1833, which provided more fully for the government. According to this pact, the children, on becoming of age, might elect to become probationary members. These were known as the members of the first class, and did not possess the right to vote or to hold office. The members of the first class, after the lapse of one year, might become full members of the second class, unless objection was raised by the latter's members. They would then possess the full privileges of the society, men and women being on the same footing, all being allowed to vote.

The government of the community was entrusted to two bodies of men, the trustees and the standing committee. The trustees were three in number, one elected each year. They took charge of the property of the society, furnished the members with all necessary articles, directed all the business, assigned the work to the members, settled disputes and maintained the peace.

The standing committee consisted of five members, elected one each year, as were the trustees. They constituted a court of appeal in case the decisions of the trustees were questioned. It was, in fact, the judiciary of the town.

ONLY ONE GENERAL AGENT.

Besides these two bodies there were two officers of the society, a treasurer, elected for four years and a general agent. The office of general agent was the highest in the community and it was created for Joseph Bimeler who had been the leader of the Separatists from the time of their departure from Germany. He was the best educated man among their number, and the leading spirit in all their operations and enterprises. At his death in 1853, no one was deemed worthy to hold the office he had held, and it ever after remained vacant.

Bimeler was the most influential man of the community and, in common with his neighbors, opposed marriage as being contrary to the will of God. After Bimeler's marriage in 1828 he ceased actively to oppose marriage and all opposition died out. Marriage was looked upon, however, simply as a civil compact to be consummated by mutual consent and not needing the services of priest or preacher.

The children were under the direct control of the trustees and at the age of three they were to be delivered up to them for education. This education was to continue until the age of thirteen for the girls, and fourteen for the boys. At these ages the children were returned to the parents, but still were subject to the will of the trustees. This means of education did not continue long. It met the fate of other institutions which do not meet the needs of the family relationship.

SHARED ALL PRODUCTS.

All manufactured and farm products were first put into a general store and each of the members had his share dealt out to him again. Each individual was to receive each year two suits of clothing; these were of plain material, as the Zoarites did not believe in ornamentation. During the strict period brown and blue were the colors prescribed for the men; black was under the ban and they were not even permitted to wear black bands on their hats.

The food was received by each family from a general supply. Some articles were distributed daily, while others were distributed at longer intervals. Bread, milk and beer were given out each day, as was cider also in its season.

The community was industrious and not only entered into the operations of farming, but at one time engaged in carrying on various manufactures. The first settlers were of necessity agricultural laborers, but when the Ohio and Erie canal was constructed opportunity was given to many of the villagers to assist and in this way

a considerable amount of money found its way into the treasurer's hands. From this time can be dated the material prosperity of the community. It is noteworthy in this connection also that the women, freed from many of the ordinary labors of the home, took their places by the side of the men in the fields.

Some idea of the diversity of their manufactures can be gained when we consider the two flour mills, run by water power, enjoyed an extensive trade in flour; saw and planing mills prepared the timbers for their own dwellings, and also for shipment; a tannery and a woolen mill furnished materials for trade with surrounding towns; they made their own beer and cider; they manufactured stoves; they had a slaughter house, a cooper shop and a pottery. These are some of the enterprises launched in this small village. Nearly all of these works had ceased to operate before the dissolution of the society and some attribute the final downfall to the bringing in of manufacturing plants when the people and the locality were fitted only for agriculture.

DECLINED AFTER BIMELER'S DEATH.

At the time of Bimeler's death, in 1853, the society numbered 500 and held more than 12,000 acres of land. At a still later period it was the possessor of a bank account of one-half million dollars, but much of this was dissipated before the society was dissolved. From Bimeler's death things declined rapidly, and at the dissolution only 136 were entitled to share in the property. Among these, 7,300 acres of land and nearly \$30,000 were distributed.

The success attained by the society can be understood only by a just appreciation of Bimeler. He was a man pre-eminent among his people; at once their temporal and spiritual leader. He held his place not by virtue of any election, but because he was recognized as a man of ability and was known by all as a man of integrity. He believed in no priesthood and rallied alike at Catholic priest and protestant minister, holding them up to contempt for preaching for money. He himself preached to his fellows without remuneration. He prepared no sermons, waiting for the inspiration of the hour to supply his theme and message. His sermons were taken down by one of the young men, whose father was deaf. In this way, the talks were preserved. They touched on all the needs of his hearers and treated of the difficulties that

arose in their everyday lives. They show him to have been a man of breadth, sympathy and versatility.

HAD NO SABBATH DAY.

The effectiveness of these sermons can be seen in the fact that after Bimeler's death the sermons were printed and the reading of some of these constituted a part of their religious services until the downfall of the society. This method of worship was adopted only after other plans had been tried and found unsatisfactory. At first the members did not believe in a Sabbath, but prosecuted their labors on that day as on any other, but in later times they began to observe Sunday as a day of rest.

During the last years, without the genius of Bimeler to guide it, the society retrograded rapidly. The influence of the man, which continued for a considerable time after his death, was able to hold the people together and make them prosper for a time, but as this influence became weaker and weaker, decline set in which could terminate in but one way. Their dress became less plain than formerly; their customs and ways of thinking changed; outside influences were slowly changing the morals of the community, though up to the time of its disbanding there had not been a single Zoarite arrested during the entire period of the society's existence for any infraction of the law in any degree, nor had there been a single divorce asked for. They possessed a jail, it is true, but when I inquired its use, I was informed that it was sometimes necessary for the accommodation of their visitors.

NOW RAIL AT INEQUALITIES.

However, the equality which was theoretically the foundation principle of the society was an equality only in name, and the only place where favoritism had not, by the time of the dissolution, had any marked effect was in the distribution of food supplies. When the visitor inquires

about the equality, the former members say:

"There was no equality; there was slavery."

They continue in explanation: "Does it look like equality when one man lives in a palace, while others live in rude huts? Bimeler's home was called the 'king's mansion,' and he built it in 1835, before the society was prosperous and while his fellows were but poorly housed."

This shows the feeling of the people today. They see that from the beginning there were differences, as in every other society of men, and, while they revere the name of their old leader, they can point to him as a proof of the inequality which existed. His home is truly a monument of this inequality; for it is a structure that would attract attention in any small city today. Large and dignified, it is by far the most striking of all their structures, if we except their modern hotel. It is somewhat remarkable that Bimeler could retain the confidence of his lowly companions, while living in a style so different from their own, and in view of the fact that he rode in a carriage while others walked, but it can be said that none doubted his uprightness, integrity and purity of purpose. A BIMELER STARTS DISSOLUTION.

Active measures for the overthrow of the society were spasmodic, and never acquired much momentum until the year 1895. In the closing months of that year Levi Bimeler, a descendant of the founder of the society, started a paper which he called the "Nugget." The avowed purpose of the paper was to bring about a dissolution of the society. The paper was suppressed after three issues had appeared, but it afterwards became evident that it was not published in vain.

Levi Bimeler, the editor, publisher and printer of the paper, was then, and is now, the village schoolmaster. In this capacity he has served his